Conundrum of Kites

Suicide: learning the difference between committing and completing

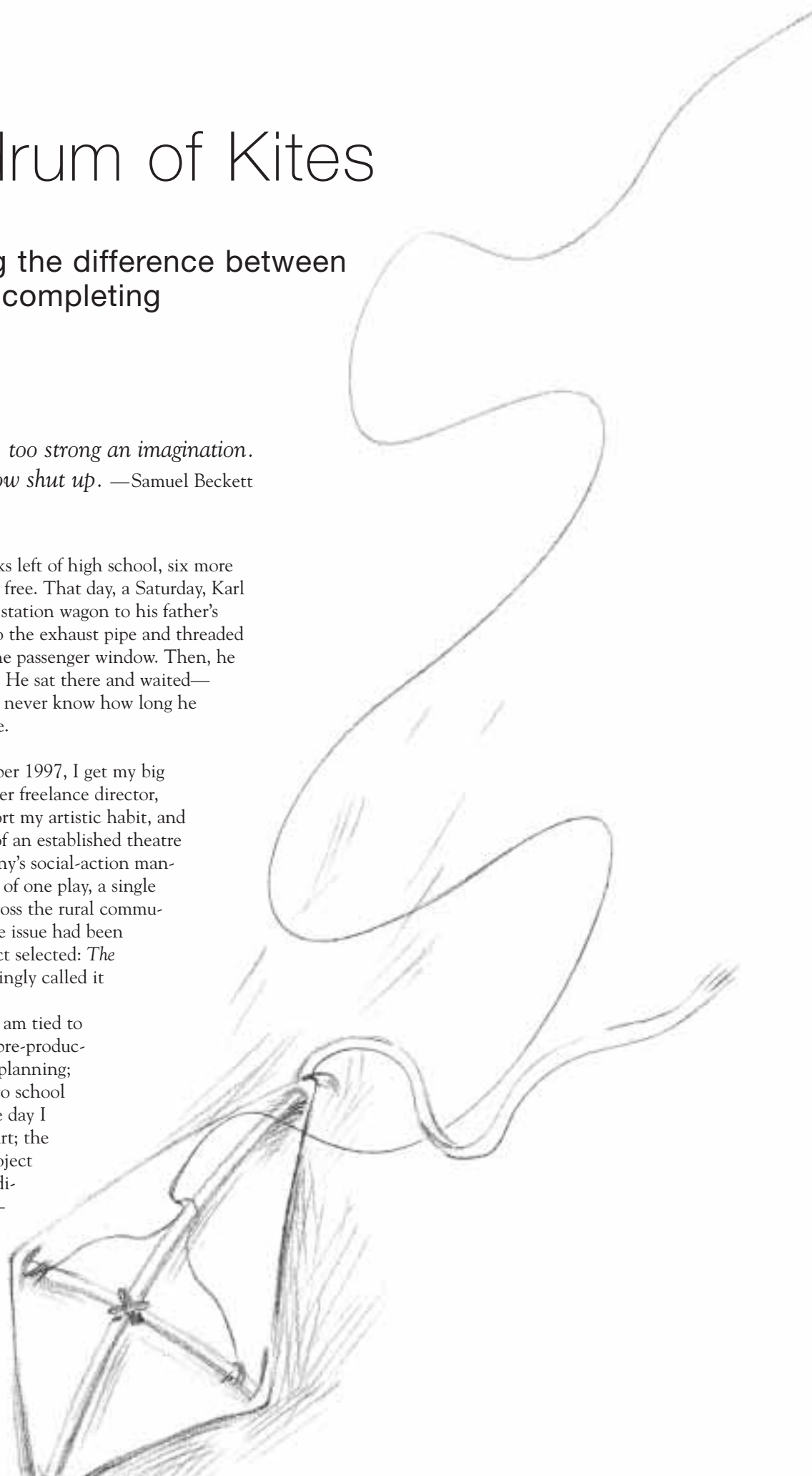
by Sophie Lees

You suicides are all alike: too strong an imagination. You did what you did, now shut up. —Samuel Beckett

May 13, 1987. Six weeks left of high school, six more weeks until we were free. That day, a Saturday, Karl drove his old Volvo station wagon to his father's cabin. He connected a hose to the exhaust pipe and threaded the hose through a crack in the passenger window. Then, he got into the car and started it. He sat there and waited—and I imagine this because I'll never know how long he waited—a very, very long time.

TEN YEARS LATER, in September 1997, I get my big break. One day I'm just another freelance director, working at Wal-Mart to support my artistic habit, and the next I'm artistic director of an established theatre company. I inherit the company's social-action mandate, as well as its season—all of one play, a single production to tour schools across the rural communities of Western Canada. The issue had been already chosen, and the project selected: *The Day Billy Lived*. People unwittingly called it *The Day Billy Died*.

For three years of my life, I am tied to this project. Eight months of pre-production research, workshops and planning; three months of rehearsals; two school years of production tours. One day I am an artist suffering for her art; the next I am responsible for a project that eventually reaches an audience of over 642,000 people—a project promoting the awareness and prevention of youth suicide—as I sink slowly to the bottom of a severe depression.



SCOTT DUTTON

KARL AND I lie on our backs in the field next to the school. We watch the clouds move across the sky. This is what we do. Skip a class, smoke a joint and existentialize. A ritual that is born in the crisp fall days of Grade 10 and dies out in the last spring days of Grade 11. We talk about life. Or at least, Karl does. I run my fingers through the grass and mostly listen. Particularly, we talk about suffering. Whether this gnawing pain we both have has any point. Like, a purpose?

Karl's a genius—that's what I think. His mind processes ideas and thoughts faster than an über-bullet. When I'm on speed, I can sometimes keep up, but lately I don't even try. Karl likes me—not like that, not like a girl/boy thing—he likes that I listen to him, and I do. I like listening to him. I like that listening is all he wants from me. I just let his brilliance cover me like a blanket and hope it absorbs into my skin. He makes connections between things that make no sense at first, but if I let them swirl long enough in my mind they'll suddenly drop in, and I'll get it. Hard. Right in my belly.

I want to be dead and Karl wants to die. It's an intimate connection. But death, fraught with meaning, has no weight, no substance, and our intimacy is light as air.

I want to be dead and Karl wants to die. It's an intimate connection. Death. It ties us together. But death, fraught with meaning, has no weight, no substance, and our intimacy, though meaningful, is light as air. Death envelops our talks, but about the underneath—the actual, physical matter of our lives— we don't speak much. His father. My mother. It's like we want our pain, our damage, to be metaphysical, to be of the grander human condition, and not from such pedestrian events of the physical world. It's why I choose to lie next to Karl, I suppose. It's why I can close my eyes and drift safely with him nearby. Because our intimacy is imaginary.

"It's just so…"

"Fucked?" I offer.

"Yeah. Fucked." He rolls onto his stomach and pushes his hair out of his face. The suddenness of his gesture pulls me onto my side so I can look at him.

"The next time he hits me, I'm gonna fucking waste him."

His dad is at least twice Karl's size, but I figure Karl knows that already. I don't really know what it means to waste someone, so I just say, "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Karl tires of abstractions. He wants and needs order, causality, control and action. Suicide fits neatly. More neatly than confronting the reality of his pain, which has more to do with his father than with the human condition. I also prefer to avoid reality, and so in Grade 11 our longing for death becomes a suicide pact.

As always, Karl researches the subject meticulously. We agree on carbon monoxide as our method of choice, our instrument of fate. We figure it's the least painful, least messy, most efficient choice. Carbon monoxide poisoning holds enough gentleness for me and enough science for him. Besides, we could do it together—just whittle our last bit of time watching the roof of the car like we do the clouds. But that was Grade 11.

IN THE TEN YEARS between Karl's death and my new job, a language of suicide emerged from what was before: silence. In the first six months of the project, I went from being mute to being fluent in this plastic language. I became a suicide specialist, a suicidologist, a certified crisis-intervention worker. I read the literature (which, eerily, was the same no matter the source). I interviewed educators, social workers, support group leaders and psychologists. I learned to replace the word "committed" with "completed." I accepted, by rote, experts' push for this word substitution, explained to me as an effort to ease social stigma. The word "committed," it was explained, carried with it a criminal connotation, and since attempting suicide was no longer a crime, "completed" was a more suitable and less negative word.

I also went from being infused with the righteous zeal of "breaking the silence," which had become my motto for the project, to being despondent, believing that the language only served the shame and stigma that make suicide unspeakable.

I WAS TEN WHEN I FIRST HIT THE BOTTOM of a depressive episode. I didn't know it to be the first until I had experienced two more and began to recognize a pattern, as though depression was a cookie cutter that precisely cut my thoughts and experiences into identical shapes.

My skin becomes thinner and thinner until it can't keep the outside world out. The horror and the sadness begin to leak into my blood until I am no longer clear where I end and the world begins. I am hollow: I look inside myself, and the stuff that makes other people weighted and worthy has vanished. Self-hatred fills the emptiness with bile and sarcasm. Its insight scalds my insides and disturbs my nights with its comments on my inadequacy. I cannot sleep for the phrase that begins to pulse through my body as forcefully as my blood: "Let me die."

MY MOTHER WAS IN ENGLAND when Karl died. In fact, the day before he died, the last time I saw him, we were driving my mother to the airport. He was on his bike, waiting for a light to change. I slunk down in my seat; I didn't want him to see me with the folks, trapped just like every other teenager.

I still wonder what he was thinking about in that moment at the intersection. To me, he just looked like a guy wanting to get to the other side.

I wasn't thinking much in that moment—just anticipating the sweetness of a whole week free from my mother and her black bottle of bitterness.

AND SO I USE THE WORD "COMPLETED." I use it in the promotional material. I use it in the educational package. I use it in my in-service with the actors on crisis intervention. I use it when I sit down with Chris Craddock, the playwright of the text. I hush Chris's whingeing about the scissors I am about to take to his text. "They don't think we should do this. They think that this play will cause a suicide epidemic."

"They" are the suicidologists and the crisis-intervention workers, and I see their point. It's a well-supported fact that suicide breeds suicide, but it's also true that one suicide can't compel another one unless that person is already contemplating it. But neither Chris nor I want a kid's blood on our hands, so he gives me permission to wield the scissors.

In the first go, I sanitize all the action surrounding the issue of suicide, word by word. Each piece of pamphlet-language I had gathered in my research, I weave into the action. To retain the humour and punchiness, Chris revises the dialogue from pamphlet-speak to teen-speak. And we have draft two. I feel sick inside.

Draft two is so politically correct, it sparkles white like a ceramic toilet in a bathroom-cleaner commercial. Chris is happy, but to me the pamphlets and play actually share the same hollow core. "At least," I think, "'completed suicide' is used."

MONDAY MORNING. I get to school late—too late, really, to consider attending my first class. At my locker, a collection of friends is gathered. Before Beth opens her mouth, before she has even formed the impulse to speak, I know it's Karl. I know he's dead, and I know he did it to himself. I've been anticipating this day for what feels like forever, and its arrival comes with a sense of relief that I'm ashamed to feel.

I don't know how, exactly, but the fallout from Karl's death would have hit me much worse had it not been for the friends that stood by my locker and waited for me.

We leave the pale brick school, walk away from the jail of cement. We walk past the wire fence that delineates school property from freedom. And I remember:

Right here, the fence takes the weight of us, Karl and me. It's the last of our existentializing, but neither of us knows it. It's one of those bitter end-of-winter days. He pins us to the fence with his relentless need to define, to articulate *It*. He is manic to make me understand. I do understand, I know *It*, but I have no words for nothingness. So we are two frozen bodies, stuck like tongues on winter's metal web. But today the cold has made me duller than usual. Karl's words fly at me faster, too fast for me to do anything but stop listening. I think, let it go, let it go, let me go…

I say, "I gotta go, man. I'm freezing my ass off," and I walk away from him. I don't even wait for his reply. I look back after a minute, and I can still see his shape, leaning into the fence.

This is a moment I have often held up to the light, trying to measure my culpability. The question, it seems to me, has always been: who left whom behind? Was it Karl who left me, or I who left Karl? In this moment, here, I walked away from Karl. Was it here that our pact dissolved?

DRAFT THREE. I'm going crazy. Literally, I think. My nights are struggles; I have to be vigilantly conscious. A slip might result in me putting a cigarette out on my thigh. Any object I hold might be a weapon with which to strike myself. I long for the transference of pain from emotional to physical. "I can't do this" repeats itself in my head. I want it to stop. I want me to stop. What right do I have to be doing this play, when I am wishing for the will to die?

My nights are full of anger, too. I'm angry with Chris, with the frontline crisis workers who have generously given me their time, with the pamphlets that are filled with words that do not speak and thoughts that do not think.

It's a well-supported fact that suicide breeds suicide, but it's also true that one suicide can't compel another one unless that person is already contemplating it.

I am angry because the message I am hearing, and the message I am speaking, says: *Suicide is bad. If you are thinking about suicide, you are crazy. If you are not crazy, you are a stupid, selfish teenager. Life is good. Even if it's not, you better start thinking that it is. Think of all the starving little babies in Africa, because compared to them you have everything. You'll get over it when you grow up.*

I am oh-so-very angry. But anger is a bubble-wrap emotion, a layer of protection from something uglier underneath. It's fear. Fear that I am a bad person, a crazy person, a stupid, selfish person. Because I have never grown up and out of suicidal feelings as I was supposed to. I am also disappointed. I've been looking for permission to die.

WE DRIFT APART in Grade 12, but drifting apart and drifting together are the natural tides of our friendship. As I'm drawn further underground, Karl rises above. He joins the swim team that year, and thus enters into the highest social strata high school offers. His prowess in the pool earns him instant popularity. I do not understand why he has climbed there. It is everything we have stood against.

I imagine his reasons are a brilliantly conceived commentary on the hypocrisy of the system. Sarcastic. Ironic. But I don't get it. I need him to explain it to me, but he is too far above me, and our days of lying in the field are long gone. Gone.

Had Karl not been on the swim team when he died, I doubt his death would have resonated through the halls at all. I have wondered whether the swim team was not, in fact, the final cause of Karl's death. For although we had become portraits of dissenting youth, what we wanted most was to belong, as if popularity would appease our parents' disaffection, as if popularity would make us somehow acceptable to ourselves. Karl, perhaps, discovered that his acceptance, that his belonging, could not change his hatred of himself.

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But as it was, he was on the swim team when he died, so his death was the juiciest piece of gossip ever to delight the ears and mouths of the inquiring minds of the student body.

Karl would have been amused at how his death went down, but I wasn't. I was disgusted, disappointed, devastated. By Tuesday, everyone had heard something about Karl's suicide, but the information came only from the students gossiping amongst themselves. And like a giant game of telephone, the initial message had become grossly distorted—and worse, distant. They talked about him like his death was an episode of a popular TV show, like he was never flesh and bone like the rest of us.

I wanted from my schoolmates a single moment of contemplation. To ask the question, "Why would a young man, full of curiosity, of passion, of imagination, of intelligence, of courage, end his life? What compelled him to choose death?" I expected the entire school to wade through the existential waters in which I have always stood. Foolish.

I waited for the school to make a formal announcement. I thought if his death were acknowledged in a serious, official manner, then it wouldn't be gossip anymore. The existential question would be contemplated, and Karl would be mourned. Not one word came from the office.

I went to the principal. Karl would have laughed at this. He would have howled. He always mocked my deference to authority, my childish belief that adults held wisdom beyond the grasp of teenagers and that just because I never saw any signs of this wisdom didn't mean it didn't exist. Foolish.

The principal, a man I thought of as kind and fair, led me into his office, and in a voice shaky and thin with anger, I demanded that the school formally announce Karl's death. Here I learned that, in 1987, suicide was treated, as a matter of policy, with silence. Mr. Davids fiddled with the pens on his desk as he listened to me. Then he cleared his throat and began.

First: "It's against the policy of the school board to announce a suicide"; and then, "It's for the protection of the other students"; and then, "Suicide has a domino effect. Often the first suicide results in other attempts."

But he wasn't a suicide to me. He was Karl.

LATER IN THE WEEK, I was cornered by the gym teacher, with whom I had never talked before.

"You were a friend of Karl's?"

"Yeah."

"I used to see you guys together."

I shrugged.

"Shocking, eh? I never woulda suspected… Just out of the blue like that…"

"It wasn't out of the blue. He'd thought about it a lot."

It fell out of my mouth, I swear. I bowed my head and stared at the floor, fighting back tears. I could feel his eyes burning into me.

"Then why didn't you do something?" he said.

I TRAINED THE CAST to do something. I trained them in crisis intervention. I trained them to facilitate the group discussion that followed every performance, the discussion that brought five people from the community for the audience to identify as people to whom they can go for help. I taught them how to undo any damage that these five people might wreak.

I taught them what to say: *If a kid is having suicidal feelings, it doesn't mean he's weak, or she's bad. Having angry or sad feelings isn't wrong. Being emotional can be a good thing, sometimes even a strength. Sometimes you just have to stick it out. It sucks, but being a kid means that you don't always have the power to stop someone from hurting you. But you won't always be a kid. And when you ask for help, you may not get it right away. You may have to ask and ask again. You might have to ask twenty people, but if you are persistent you will find the help you need. You have to trust yourself more than anyone else.*

And when the cast came through Edmonton on their travels, I listened to them and we talked through the problems, the fears, the triumphs. I told them what a difference they had made and what a great job they had done. I read them the letters from the kids they had helped. I trained them, I taught them.

But I realized I could give them only the surface. That for the silence we broke, another, deeper silence exists. And that silence is mine. There were things I couldn't talk about. I didn't tell them about Karl. I couldn't tell them that I wanted to die. Because I know one thing for sure: To tell someone that you think about death is to

lose their respect. To tell that you suffer from a mental illness is to change instantly and irrevocably how they see you. What was strength is now weakness. What was accepted is now doubted. What was once spoken is forever silenced.

I DON'T RECALL ANOTHER TIME when the three of us, my brother, my father and I, so collectively and desperately desired my mother's presence. And when she returned that Friday, she must have been overwhelmed, from jet lag and from our neediness.

I had been holding it together, holding it in as best I could. Contain. But I could feel pieces of me slipping here and there. I wanted a lap on which to lay my head. Give in to grief, dissolve, with two arms to hold me tight and safe. Two arms to hold my shape so I wouldn't disappear.

My father, the doctor, dismissed the news of my dead friend with an uncomfortable shrug and a "That's too bad." I didn't expect more than this; I knew he had nothing more to give. It was a mother's love I needed, but I should have known better than to expect it from my mother.

"Karl? I don't remember a Karl," she said. "You mustn't have known him very well."

I didn't tell her that Karl and I met in Grade 7, that I had the privilege of watching his shoulders broaden and his chest develop, and listening to his voice deepen. I didn't tell her about the beauty of his collarbone that always stuck out from beneath his t-shirts. I didn't tell her that he wore glasses, braces, and a uniform of jeans and a shapeless t-shirt. I didn't remind her that he was my date at our Grade 9 grad.

And I didn't tell her what made him so precious. Not a word about his intellect, a sharp, polished blade that cut to the quick so sure you never saw its solid shape, just an occasional glint in the sunlight.

"His poor parents. That's who I feel sorry for."

KARL'S FATHER CALLED THE POLICE when Karl didn't come home that night. I imagine he felt some prickle under his skin telling him something was not right. The local police were dispatched to the scene: a cabin in the woods, a rusty old Volvo station wagon parked in the driveway. In the back seat of the car, a policeman discovered a cardboard box, which contained Karl's suicide note, as well as various personal belongings he wished to bestow on his friends.

He left me a kite.

A KITE... Could there be a more poignant, poetic gesture?

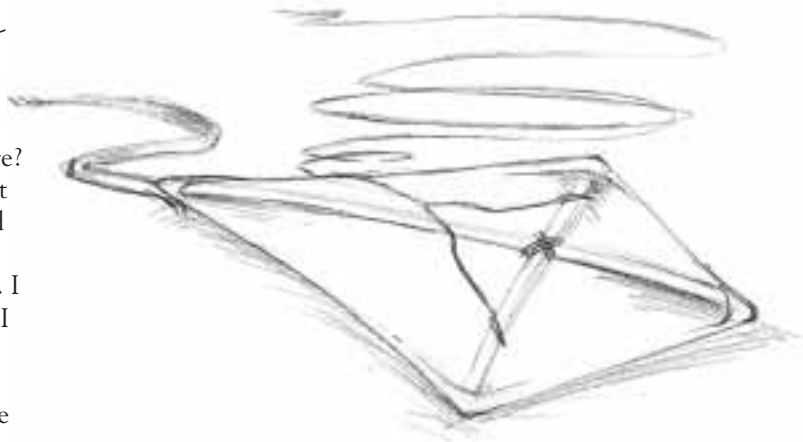
And yet, it puzzled me, frustrated me, and Karl wasn't around to explain its significance, which lay just beyond my grasp. I mean, we had never flown a kite together, Karl and me. In fact, I don't think I had ever flown one. I was determined to unravel its intended meaning before I took this kite to some park. I couldn't fly it if ambiguity persisted: our connection would be polluted. But underneath the initial greeting card sentiment attached to the image of a kite, I discovered nothing. Certainly, there is a sense of flying and freedom, but it is illusion, masterminded and manipulated by the person on the ground.

I never flew the kite, and eventually, after numerous moves, it got lost. Yet the kite becomes more meaningful to me as the years pass. Really, it is a perfectly constructed metaphor for our friendship: tenuous yet powerful, significant yet weightless. I carry him with me through my life, not as a person but as a marker. I never knew him. I knew his superficial layers, not his substance. When he was alive, I couldn't distinguish the superficial from the substantial. Now, some seventeen years too late, I am ready.

These days I have been granted a reprieve from my disorder; it comes in an eight-pill elixir— Wellbutrin, Effexor, Dexedrine, and Rivotril—and it has given me a distance in which to seek some clarity on suicide. I can see that no matter how deeply down I'm driven, I will not end my life. Permission is denied. If there is one quality that encompasses suicide, it is violence. I am not a violent person.

I used to envy Karl his choice; I used to think he was stronger, more courageous than me. Perhaps he was; I'll never know. But I no longer think of us as twins cleaved from a single cell, two halves of a whole, separated by a single choice. I imagined we suicides were all the same, but we are not. I want to speak for all suicides, who chose silence when they chose to die. But because of my desire to speak from the silence, I cannot be a suicide.

KARL LEFT THE CAR. Probably, the slow fade we'd always imagined was just too slow. Instead of carbon monoxide, he decided on a method more violent, more deliberate, more angry. He went into the cabin, loaded his father's shotgun, and came back outside. He went into the clearing where we had once watched the northern lights on mushrooms. Those purple-pink lights like fingers reaching down to stroke my face.

Karl stood in the clearing with a loaded gun. He blew his head off.

Sophie Lees has left her career in theatre and is currently a student at Grant MacEwan's Professional Writing Program. She is much happier.